

BIG CATFISH FROM OUR SMALLER LAKES

**Blues, channels
and flatheads are
possible on select
waters such as Boltz,
A.J. Jolly and others.
Is one near you?**

by Paul Moore

Blue catfish are the largest of the three main species of catfish. They are generally regarded as big-water fish. In large rivers and reservoirs, blue cats may grow to enormous sizes and some will even top the 100-pound mark. However, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) has been experimenting with stocking blue cats in some of our state's smaller impoundments. The results have been mixed so far, but they are definitely providing anglers with some real thrills on these smaller waters.

Many people are becoming somewhat familiar with the blue cat stock-

ing program because of Taylorsville Lake. Blue cats have been stocked there since 2002 and they have done quite well with anglers now catching some very large fish. With word of Taylorsville's success getting out, many people believe 2002 is when the whole program was started. However, the stocking program in the smaller impoundments actually began several years earlier.

In the 1990s, several of Kentucky's smaller lakes were exhibiting stunted populations of bluegills and other panfish. Some of the lakes were simply overpopulated with sunfish. Others were overpopulated with shad, which

leads to predatory fish preying more on the shad and thus the sunfish become even more stunted as a result.

The KDFWR, looking for a way to curtail some of this overpopulation, decided to begin stocking blue catfish as an experiment to see if they would reduce the number of smaller fish and ultimately help bluegills to thin out in number and grow to a more quality size. Biologists had looked at literature that suggested the blue catfish had a preference for small sunfish. Therefore, they picked four lakes and began a research-stocking program.

Two of the lakes had shad present, and the other two didn't. All contained

stunted bluegills. The two lakes picked with shad were Bullock Pen and A.J. Jolly. The two lakes that did not have shad (but lots of stunted bluegills/sunfish) were Boltz and Reformatory.

Jeff Crosby, a fisheries biologist with the KDFWR, said the initial assessment is inconclusive, but it doesn't appear that stocking the blue cats has worked as well as was hoped. They haven't seen major changes in bluegill populations as what they wanted, so he said he is not sure the project is meeting objectives.

In fact, the stocking of blue cats was suspended at A.J. Jolly and they were replaced with flathead catfish. Crosby said some of the blue cats were just not growing. After three years, some of the fish were still in the 10-inch range. Others, though, were much larger. "It seems like some of the fish struggle to get over the hump. Once they do get over the hump, they grow well. There are some fish in there that are 15 pounds or more."

A second phase of the blue cat stocking program is now underway. Chris Hickey, a warmwater biologist, is experimenting with stocking different sizes of catfish to see if one size does better than another. "We've seen some fish at age 6 that are 15 inches long and others that are over 30 inches. They were stocked at the same time, but some just never seem to grow."

Hickey said they are now stocking some fish that are less than 10 inches and others that are over 12 inches. The fish are marked differently so they can be evaluated at a later date. He said they've only been stocking and marking the fish for the past couple years, so it's too early to see if there are better results than before. This stocking phase will continue another three years at Bullock Pen, Boltz and Reformatory lakes.

Although the blue catfish stocking program at these lakes wasn't originally started to directly create a better catfish fishery for anglers, it certainly has provided extra opportunity for fishing. There are some really fine catfish in these lakes waiting to put an arch in an angler's rod. Here is a little closer look at each of the four stocked lakes.

BOLTZ LAKE

Boltz Lake in Grant County has

some unusual characteristics for a small lake. It is fairly steep-sided and quite deep for a lake of only 92 acres. It has a maximum depth of 72 feet and an average depth of 24 feet. It is surrounded by farmland, and cattle have access to one side of the lake.

There is not a great deal of habitat in the lake, according to Crosby. However, the KDFWR has been enhancing the habitat by putting in old Christmas trees. There is a 50-foot easement all around the lake, but topography and other factors limit the amount of bank-fishing access. Most of the best bank-fishing is confined to the area right near the dam.

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Hickey said they know there are some really nice fish in the lake, but it is difficult to sample because of the depth and other factors. "We will go sample one time and get a certain set of results. The next time we go sample, we get something totally different."

The lake is highly fertile and always seems to produce good catfish. Hickey said he knows there are catfish of 10 pounds or more, but they are not able to find them consistently while sampling. However, because of ample stocking numbers and good conditions at the lake, the fish are there and ready to put some excitement in an angler's day.

Boltz received about 1,840 blue catfish during previous stocking years and is now on schedule to get about 900 per year. However, those numbers could fluctuate depending on any changes to the stocking research. Additionally, the lake is stocked annually with channel catfish. Some 2,300 channel cats are introduced to the lake each year. There are plenty of channel catfish in the fiddler size and some blue catfish up to and above 5 pounds. Channel catfish must be at least 12 inches in length to be harvested.

Boltz Lake is off Interstate 75 at the Dry Ridge exit. There is a boat

launch, as well as a small concessionaire that is operated seasonally. The boat launch is available year 'round. During the season, bait and other supplies are available for sale at the retail store. Boat and motor rentals are also available.

BULLOCK PEN LAKE

Bullock Pen Lake is also in Grant County. It is approximately 134 acres in size and located about two miles west of Crittenden off state Route (SR) 491. Bullock Pen is not as deep or as steep-sided as the previous lake. It has a maximum depth of 48 feet with an average depth of 18 feet.

There is a lot of good habitat at Bullock Pen also. The lake contains rocky banks and plenty of leftover stumps and other woody structure. There is also a lot of water willow, which is an emergent aquatic plant that grows along the bank.

Most of the best fishing is done by boat. As at Boltz, there is a 50-foot easement around the lake, but most of the bank-fishing access will be found near the dam. Houses surround much of Bullock Pen Lake, which makes bank access difficult.

Hickey said the blue catfish fishery has been up and down and exhibits a lot of fluctuation during sampling efforts by the KDFWR. They have seen some bigger blue catfish, but not as frequently as at some of the other lakes. The channel catfish, on the other hand, have been faring much better and are "doing as expected," according to Hickey. Occasionally, an angler will hook a really nice-sized blue cat.

Originally, Bullock Pen received about 2,680 blue catfish. Now, the stocking rate is typically about 900 fish per year. Channel catfish are stocked annually to the tune of about 3,350 per year. Harvest of channel catfish at Bullock Pen is regulated by a 12-inch minimum length limit.

Bullock Pen has a boat launch and marina that is open all year. Fishing supplies and other necessities are available for sale, as well as opportunities for boat rental. The ramp may be reached by taking Interstate 75 north from Williamstown to Exit 166. Then follow SR 2363 west and turn left onto Violet Road to the lake.

REFORMATORY LAKE

Bank-fishing anglers will delight

upon reaching this small lake in Oldham County, as there are no boats allowed on this waterway. A prison is located on one side of the lake, so obviously using boats is not considered to be a good idea here. However, there is decent bank-fishing access on the other side of the lake and it is accessible from the Wendell Moore Park at LaGrange.

Crosby ranks the catfish fishery at Reformatory Lake as "decent." Hickey refers to it as "the oddball" out of the three lakes at which he is currently monitoring blue catfish stockings. He said the lake has very good numbers of blues and channels, as well as some really large flatheads.

"I'm not really sure how or when the flatheads were introduced to the lake, but there are some really big fish in there. Some are up to about 20 pounds. I'd say there is very minimal, if any, reproduction though."

He went on to say that there are also some real nice blue cats at the lake with plenty of fish above 5 pounds. Channel catfish are stocked annually and they are present in very good numbers and sizes as well. The channel cats are stocked at a rate of about 1,300 fish per year. Blue cats stocking was recorded at approximately 1,080 fish.

Anglers will find the habitat conditions at Reformatory Lake to be similar to Bullock Pen. It is more of a shallow-type lake with some water willow present. There is also some good woody structure available in the form of fallen trees and limbs on the park side of the lake.

To reach the Wendell Moore Park and the bank access at Reformatory Lake, follow SR 146 west out of LaGrange and turn right onto SR 393 and follow to the lake. Fishing, restrooms and retail sales are available at the lake year 'round. A handicap-accessible fishing pier is also available.

A.J. JOLLY

As mentioned earlier, the blue catfish stocking program has been abandoned at A.J. Jolly in favor of stocking flathead catfish. A.J. Jolly Lake is not only home to a stunted sunfish fishery, but also there are way too many bullhead catfish present. Flathead catfish were introduced in an effort to have an immediate and direct effect on the

overpopulation of sunfish and bullheads.

Katie Emme, an assistant district fishery biologist to Jeff Crosby, is heading up the flathead catfish research project at the lake. They are not currently stocking the lake, but it is in more of a monitoring stage now. However, there are some very nice fish available to anglers.

The flatheads stocked into the lake were already of adult size, according to Hickey. He said the flatheads stocked into the lake ranged in size between 2 and 8 pounds at the time of stocking. Because of the flatheads being adult size, they were stocked at a lower rate per acre than the blue catfish that were previously stocked. The blue cats were stocked at a rate of about seven to 10 fish per acre.

Although the blue cats are no longer being stocked, Hickey said the lake is still full of them. He said there are good numbers of blues and also some very good-sized fish as well. Channel cats are still stocked at the lake and good numbers of them are present, too.

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The biologists are hoping the flatheads will have more of an effect at the lake than did the blues. A flathead catfish is more of a hunter and prefers to eat live fish. Not as variable with appetite as are the blue and channel cats, flatheads will look almost exclusively to eat shad, sunfish and other small fishes, unless there is a shortage of available prey. At A.J. Jolly, there is no such shortage, so the flatheads are feeding and growing well.

A.J. Jolly Lake contains approximately 175 acres and is located in Campbell County near Alexandria. At the A.J. Jolly Park, a boat-launching ramp and shoreline access area is available to accommodate both boat- and bank-anglers alike. There are restrooms, picnic and camping areas available year 'round. To get to the

lake and park, follow U.S. Hwy 27 south from Alexandria until reaching SR 824 East. Follow SR 824 to the park.

OTHER OPTIONS

While these small lakes are the primary ones with good populations of blue catfish, there are also a few other options. The KDFWR stocks a few other lakes with blue catfish on an annual basis. However, this stocking is not part of the sunfish management program and is more just an attempt to provide a little extra angling opportunity for anglers.

The West Fork Drakes Reservoir in Simpson County receives about 350 blue cats annually. Spa Lake in Logan County gets approximately 1,200 blues each year. In Monroe County, Mill Creek Lake receives some 545 blue cats per year. Also, at the KDFWR property in Frankfort, the Upper and Lower Sportsmen's lakes get stocked annually with varying numbers of blue cats. All of these lakes are also stocked with channel cats annually.

Another lake to keep on the radar for the future is Dewey Lake over in the eastern part of the state. This lake, at 1,100 acres, is much larger than the smaller lakes we've looked at so far, but it is being added to the blue catfish stocking program, too, albeit for an entirely different reason.

Dewey Lake has been infested with zebra mussels, which are an aquatic invasive species. The KDFWR is planning to stock blue catfish in an attempt to reduce the saturation of the unwanted mussels. This lake already has a great catfish fishery for channel and flatheads, so the addition of blue catfish could round out this water nicely and be a real gem for catfish anglers soon.

FISHING TIP

Anglers who are looking to tap into these blue cats should remember that these whiskerfish exhibit different habits than channel and flathead cats. Blues tend to pod up and suspend more in open water and are prone to large schools, especially when smaller in size. In these small lakes, look for them also in creek channels and to associate more closely to points and flats. While small, they can be taken on a lot of the same baits as channel cats. □